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ABSTRACT

This paper explores attempts which have been made to close the gap between researchers and policymakers in the social and behavioral sciences. The traditional role of the researcher is viewed as being isolated from attempts to apply research to the world of action. Methods to alleviate this situation are discussed. Educational research and development centers are cited as the most conducive to a good working relationship between researcher and policymaker, essentially because the researcher has an obvious potential recipient for his work. There is a need for superstructural levels where knowledge input could be integrated into long range planning and experimentation. (SE)

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ROLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND POLICYMAKERS

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Role Relationships Between Researchers and Policymakers

A great deal has been written about the distinction between disciplinary research and policy making research. Attention has been given to the gap between these two activities, often discussed in terms of knowledge production and knowledge utilization. This paper will explore attempts that have been made to close this gap with specific attention to the roles involved.

The Traditional Role of the Researcher

Disciplinary research within the social and behavioral sciences has had as its goal the production of knowledge. It may begin with the cumulative theory in an area of human or social action and attempt to fill in areas where our knowledge is lacking, or build upon existing theory to describe or explain individual or collective behavior. It may begin with analysis of deviant cases that are not explained or accounted for by the prevailing theories. Since most theories that explain individual or collective action are couched in ceteris paribus frameworks, deviant case analyses made result in explanations for why some sub-group does not conform to expected behavior on the basis of the more general theory. Eventually this may lead to a revision of the more general theory so that it then encompasses one or more of these subgroups. Social or behavioral scientists may simply find that existing explanations do not fit a case they have observed and they may go back to the original empirical data offered to support or formulate theory and reconstruct alternative explanations that may then be tested. Regardless of the basis on which a problem has been initiated (and this list is not meant to be exhaustive), the research results are expressed as descriptions or explanations of individual or collective behavior. The theories that may be constructed from this research may be prerequisite knowledge for creating meaningful policies or action decisions that might resolve social problems, but they do not directly address this

arena. Policy-makers in the world of action would be hard pressed to attempt to keep in touch with this knowledge which is published in a variety of technical journals, books, professional association proceedings of meetings, etc. Even if they do locate research results which may have relevance for the action decisions that they are making, the onus is upon them to transform these descriptive or explanatory theories into prescriptions for action. It is not surprising that policy-makers are unable to capitalize on all the knowledge which have been produced.

There appears to be a growing trend among social and behavioral scientists, however, that may help to alleviate this gap. Scientists are beginning to look more frequently for problems for research from another source. Broad problems are often identified and articulated by those in the arena of action. Although these problems are generally complex and cannot be resolved by research conducted within the domain of a single discipline, more and more social and behavioral scientists seem to be willing to make a contribution to the resolution of problems that have been defined by persons in the arena of action problems. In order to do this, however, it is necessary that communication structures and support systems be established. Before examining the structures and roles which have been tried, it is helpful to consider the processes involved. First, the social or behavioral scientist must be informed that a problem as defined by practitioners, program developers or persons in the action arena, exists. Even if he accepts the existence of the problem as it has been articulated, he must translate it into a problem that is researchable, given his frame of reference. The frame of reference of the researcher determines how he will define an appropriate problem for research, what theoretical knowledge and methodology he will bring to bear on the problem, what variables

will be attended to and how the data will be collected and manipulated in order to study and explain the phenomenon. It also determines the rules of evidence or truth tests that he will employ to check the validity of the knowledge gained. If he is able to identify a problem from the arena of action, transform it into a researchable problem, to gain support for the research and the access that he needs, the research results will be stated as descriptions or explanatory theory. Traditionally this has been the end of the cycle for the researcher who publishes his research results and receives recognition from his professional reference group for his contribution to new knowledge. If these results are to have an impact on problem resolution in the action world, however, someone must transform these results into prescriptions for action. This is not a process of logical deduction but rather must introduce other assumptions and pragmatic concerns. Researchers in academia have frequently been reluctant to take this risk. These prescriptions for action are not amenable to the truth tests or rules of evidence that they employ in conducting research. Action plans may require that experiments be conducted and pragmatic tests be employed. Even if the researcher is willing to state the implications of his research for action, however, he may not know to whom to address his findings. Quite often the researcher is aware that his research is too restricted or narrow to be used as the only basis for policy decisions and program plans. The ideal situation might be one in which various researchers with different frames of reference addressed the same problem and fed their results and the implications for action to policy makers or program developers who could make decisions using all of the information provided by the various researchers. This would require that policy-makers have a planning orientation rather than making more immediate responses to existing situations since this process is inevitably time consuming.

If we look at the role relationships that have existed between social scientists who have produced knowledge and men who might take action to utilize knowledge, we find a variety of situations.

1. The social or behavioral scientist who is isolated from the policy-makers, developers, or persons in the action arena. The scientist who undertakes research may be located in a university setting but conducting research to gain knowledge that has relevancy to some problem confronting persons outside of his setting. He may have responded to a request for proposal from a funding agency that has determined that a problem area exists or he may have identified a problem from some contact with the world of action. This contact may be through literature or through personal contact. When he has completed his research, he may turn his attention to the utilization of this knowledge. This is a risk-taking step, however, since the adequacy of the knowledge for prescribing change is always problematic. If the persons who might act on his suggestions are unknown to him, if any experiments based on his suggestions cannot be monitored by him, if he will not receive feedback from such activity that would allow him to modify his suggestions as a consequence, there is little incentive for him to take this step.

2. The social or behavioral scientist in contact with identified policy-makers, developers or persons in the action world. If the researcher is either conducting his research within the same organizational context as policy-makers, program developers or persons who are able to take action, or if he has an identified person or group of persons with whom he can interact, transforming his knowledge into recommendations

for action may be facilitated. This is not a simple step even under these conditions. For example, in a research and development organization, a researcher may make recommendations to those who are developing programs. If the recommendations require an additional component or some change in practices, they may be readily absorbed into on-going activities by the existing staff of developers. If, however, the suggestions require a new program conceptualization or fundamental changes, the researcher may find himself having to take on the role of developer.

3. Another role relationship which fits under this category of researcher and policy-makers within one organization structure is that of the consultant. In the educational system this role occurs frequently at the level of an operating school district. The policy or decision makers who have called in a social scientist as consultant often expect that he will be able to offer immediate answers to "how to" questions. An article by Gross and Fishman, "The Management of Educational Establishments," in The Uses of Sociology (Lazarsfeld, editor) discusses the misperceptions that can occur in these role relationships. Often there is little understanding of the processes involved for the scientist-consultant. The consultant must transform the problem as defined by the policy-makers into problems on which relevant research may have been done. Even if he locates or is familiar with appropriate research, he must then transform the explanatory theories that seem relevant into prescriptions for action. Policy-makers who are often under pressure to make immediate decisions are unable to delay until even these activities have been accomplished. The search for available theories may reveal a lack of knowledge that would indicate a need for research but rarely

is there a provision for the conduct of this research. The consultant may contribute potential uses of the knowledge that he has access to but he frequently recognizes the need to tap other areas of expertise. Although it could be argued that the policy-makers would benefit from at least the application of expert knowledge from one knowledge base, the consultant may recognize the bias that could be reflected in decision-making of policy setting if attention is not also given to other areas of expert knowledge. Usually the expectation is that only one consultant can perform all of the search and transformation tasks and that the consultant can become, in effect, a policy-maker himself.

4. The role of the change agent has similar relationships to policy or decision-makers but rather than explore research findings and transform them into prescriptions for action, the change agent searches for available programs or practices. These available programs reflect policies or decisions that have been built into their design by the developer, who may have based them on transformations from descriptive or explanatory theory into prescriptions for developmental action. The policy-makers in the action setting decide to adopt or reject the available programs and if they adopt them, they take on the policy decisions that were made in the process of program development.

The Problem of Whom to Address

At the present time, the educational research and development centers are perhaps the environments that are most conducive to moving from descriptive or explanatory theory to prescriptions for action. As programs are developed and tried out, problems that require further research are revealed. If a researcher defines a problem for research on the basis of these problems that are encountered, implications from that research can be translated into action plans. I do not

mean to minimize the difficulty of converting knowledge into action plans to utilize the knowledge. What this environment does offer, however, are potential recipients of the suggestions for action who may try out these suggestions. The researcher can monitor anticipated and unanticipated consequences, offer advice, or be consulted by those taking action.

What is occurring in these situations is that a problem area is perceived as existing in schools, research and development activities are undertaken and programs to resolve the problem become products for dissemination to schools. If the "products" are packageable, they can be made available to schools where policy-makers decide that they will meet some need. The program materials are generally accompanied by manuals on how to use the materials, classroom management strategies, etc.

When research results suggest changes other than those which are built into or centered around packageable programs, the role relationship between researchers and policy-makers becomes more difficult to establish. If the recommendations are not part of a packageable entity, the question becomes one of identifying policy-makers to whom one can address suggestions for action. Examples of this type might be research of the structure of school environments, professional roles, relationship with school communities. If these policy-makers are located only at the level of individual school districts, effecting significant change from a national perspective becomes problematic.

There appears to be a growing emphasis on planning at the state level. If at this level longer range planning is undertaken by a staff able to assess and relate expert knowledge from various disciplines, these planning divisions might become potential audiences for knowledge which has been produced and suggestions on how it might be utilized. At this level, it would seem to be more feasible to have consultants with the range of expertise needed than is usually the case at the school district level.

The lack of superstructural levels where knowledge inputs and suggestions for action could be integrated into long-range planning and experimentation appears to be detrimental to the creation of roles where scientists and policy-makers could collaborate in the utilization of knowledge in the field of education.